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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of underachievement among gifted and nongifted black students were studied with students in grades 6 through 9 in 5 Virginia public school districts. A traditional model of underachievement, defining it through a regression model, and a nontraditional model that used grade point averages (GPAs) and self-reported level of effort in school were used. Few gifted black students were identified by the school system. The sample was increased through examination of school records by the researcher. In all, 152 gifted, potentially gifted, and average middle school and high school students were interviewed. Forty-two percent of these students were underachieving, although the mean GPA was relatively high at 3.1. Test anxiety, while relatively low for the sample as a whole, was problematic when the self-evaluation and physiological subscales were examined. The students had strong and positive racial identities, and generally had optimistic attitudes and perceptions, especially in their attitudes toward school and their perceptions of the learning environment. In general, these black students were positive about school subjects, and tended to have positive perceptions of gifted students and gifted education. However, achievement behaviors did not match achievement attitudes. School districts must focus on both talent development and the nurturing of abilities, and must recognize the heterogeneous and multifaceted nature of giftedness. (Contains three unnumbered tables.) (SLD)

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ED 399 324

A STUDY OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT AMONG GIFTED BLACK STUDENTS

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Paper presented at the annual conference of AERA, New York, New York. April, 1996

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Talent that is unrecognized, unnurtured, or ignored will atrophy.

Demographics of Gifted Education Programs Nationally

(percentages)

	School Population	Gifted Education
White American	71.2	81.4
African American	16.2	8.4
Hispanic American	9.1	4.7
Native American / American Indian	1.0	0.3
Asian American	2.5	5.0

A paucity of research exists regarding correlates of underachievement among gifted Black students, and few studies have examined students' perceptions. There is, however, much research indicating that Black and other minority youth are severely under-represented in gifted programs and they are less likely to achieve their potential in school. Specifically, while Black students comprise 16% of the school population, they comprise only 8% of gifted programs nationally. While previous research (Ford, 1992, 1993) has examined social, cultural, and psychological barriers to achievement as perceived by gifted and non-gifted Black students, to date, no studies have been found that examine underachievement among gifted Black youth relative to racial identity, test anxiety, perceptions of the learning environment, and attitudes toward school subjects. Self-perceptions certainly play important roles in inhibiting and enhancing student achievement. All of these factors inhibit both the identification of students (particularly Black and other minority students) as gifted and/or gifted underachievers. The proposed study can help to explain why Black youth tend to underachieve academically and to be under-represented in gifted programs.

Research Design and Methodology

The current study was designed to understand more fully the dynamics of underachievement among gifted and non-gifted Black students. These students are in grades 6 through 9 in five Virginia public school districts. Gifted students are those formally identified by their school district and participating in gifted programs. Two definitions of underachievement were adopted:

(1) Traditional model: According to Mandel and Marcus (1989) and others, underachievers are best identified using a regression model. Therefore, students' standardized achievement test scores (ITBS, grade 4) and grade point averages were used as indices of underachievement. Students whose scores deviate one or more standard deviations from the regression line (i.e., predicted score) were defined as underachievers; and

(2) Non-traditional model: Students' grade point averages and self-reported level of effort in school (a measure of motivation) were assessed. Students reporting low effort will also be considered underachievers. Eighty percent of both the gifted and non-gifted Black students surveyed by Ford (1991, 1992) reported low effort, and boredom and disinterest in school. Because Black youth tend not to perform well on standardized tests (e.g., test bias, poor test-taking skills), non-standardized indices of assessment were used to seek this second pool of underachieving Black students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the general research question: What factors contribute to the under-representation of Black students in gifted programs and underachievement among Black students in different academic groups?

I To what extent have Black students been overlooked for placement in gifted education programs and services?

II What variables distinguish achievers from underachievers? In essence, what factors contribute to academic resiliency among Black students?

(1) What are the Black students' perceptions of the learning environment, attitudes toward school subjects, curriculum, achievement, gifted education, teachers, and other school-related variables? How do these attitudes differ among gifted, potentially.gifted, and average achievers and underachievers?

(2) How do the students perceive their peer relations, specifically peer pressures and achievement orientation? How do these perceptions differ relative to the six groups of achievers and underachievers?

(3) What are the students' perceptions of social injustices relative to Blacks? Do their perceptions differ by the six groups?

(4) How do the Black students perceive their parents' achievement orientation, and to what extent are there differences between achievers and underachievers?

(5) What are students' perceptions of psychological variables and how do they differ among the six groups?

III Can profiles of achievement and underachievement be developed based on the variables under investigation?

INSTRUMENTATION

Likert-type items

(strongly agree = 4, agree = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1)

ACADEMIC

Achievement behaviors (homework, effort)

Attitudes toward school (curriculum, teachers)

Attitudes toward school subjects
(Estes scales--English, reading, math, science, social studies)

Attitudes toward achievement ideology

Attitudes toward gifted students and programs, achievers, & underachievers

Test Anxiety (Sarason, et al.)

SCHOOL CLIMATE

Affective or Social-Emotional Climate

Relationship with teachers
Relationships with classmates
Teacher attitudes toward teaching
Teacher expectations for students
Opportunities to understand material

SOCIAL

Peers	Injustices
Psychological	Discrimination
Isolation	Racism
Physical confrontations	Unequal power & wealth

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Racial Identity
Fears, anxiety, stress
Locus of control
Responsibility for learning and achievement

CULTURAL

Parental achievement orientation

Parent involvement in education

Reliability Coefficients for Scales and Subscales

Variable	Number of Items	$\bar{X}$	Reliability Coefficient
Perceptions of Learning Environment (overall)	36	2.9	.93
Attitudes Toward School Subjects			
English	12	3.0	.89
Math	13	3.1	.89
Reading	13	3.0	.92
Science	11	3.1	.88
History/Social Studies	13	3.0	.92
Test Anxiety Scale	30	2.5	.91
Racial Identity Subscale	24	3.1	.72
Cultural Subscale -- Family Achievement Orientation	10	3.5	.82
Psychological Subscale	9	2.5	.66
Social Subscale -- Peer Relations	22	2.1	.76
Social Subscale -- Injustices	7	2.5	.75
Achievement Ideology Subscale	12	3.4	.86

SAMPLING

School personnel were contacted for the names of Black students identified as gifted, as well as identification criteria and procedures. To ensure confidentiality, schools mailed permission forms to parents. Parental permission forms, however, were returned to the primary investigator. Once parental permission was received, designated school personnel (either the gifted coordinator or school counselor) were contacted regarding the scheduling of interviews.

Gifted Black students are both poorly represented in the study and the school districts. Forty-two students (28%) in the sample were formally identified as gifted by their respective school district. Specifically, the discrepancy in the five districts appear in Table 2. The extent of under-representation in each school district ranged from 50% to 100% (that is, no Black students identified as gifted in grades 6-9).

So few gifted Black students were identified in the districts that the researcher had to examine school records (GPA and achievement test scores) for high potential students. Because the school districts had severely under-identified Black students as gifted, the researcher created a category of students labelled "potentially gifted." Sixty-two students (42%) were categorized as "potentially gifted" based on the following criteria:

1 One ITBS subscale at or above the 90th percentile

2 Two ITBS subscales at or above the 80th percentile

3 Three ITBS subscales at or above the 70th percentile

4 Students not meeting 1 to 3, but GPAs greater than or equal to 3.0 (4.0 scale)

5 Students not meeting 1 to 4; GPA less than 3.0 but one or more ITBS subscales at the 70th percentile or above

Based on the limited available data, the researcher concluded that these students: (a) should have been identified as gifted and/or (b) should be given further assessments to more fully consider their potential for placement. In several instances, there was no question that the Black students had been overlooked, despite clear indicators of giftedness. In other instances, students demonstrated the potential for requiring special or additional services to meet their needs.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Six research assistants (all Black, 3 males) were trained to interview students. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. Interviewers read items to students and recorded their responses onto the questionnaire. Interviews were held during school hours.

Descriptive analyses, comparative analyses (e.g., MANOVAs, ANOVAs), regression analysis, and discriminant analysis were used to analyze the data. The model under investigation is 3x2 (three academic groups by two achievement levels), which results in six groups of students: gifted achievers, gifted underachievers, potentially gifted achievers, potentially gifted underachievers, average achievers, and average underachievers.

RESULTS

Demographic Information

Of the 152 Black middle and high school students interviewed, most were females (n=97, 64%). There were 8 students in grade 6 (5%), 53 students in grade 7 (35%), 50 students in grade 8 (33%), and 41 students grade 9 (27%). Students ranged in age from 11 to 15, with a mean age of 13 and modal age of 14.

Two thirds of the students reported paying full price for lunch (n=96, 64%). Most students report living with both parents (n=85, 56%), and many (n=55, 36%) report living with their mothers only. One hundred and forty-two students knew the employment status of their fathers, with 117 (82%) reporting fathers as employed. One hundred and twelve were aware of their father's educational level, with 40 students (36%) indicating that their father had a high school diploma and 45 (40%) reporting fathers as having a college degree.

More students were aware of their mother's employment status (n=151) and educational level (n=145). One hundred and twenty-three students stated that their mothers were employed, and 34 students (23%) reported that their mother had a high school diploma, 33 students (23%) reported mothers having some college experience, and 57 students (39%) reporting mothers as having a college degree.

Demographic Characteristics of Students by Gender and Academic Program

	Male	Female	Total
Gifted	16 (11%)	27 (18%)	43 (28%)
Potentially Gifted	21 (14%)	41 (27%)	62 (41%)
Average	18 (12%)	29 (19%)	47 (31%)
Total	55 (36%)	97 (64%)	152

NOTE: Percentages are rounded; therefore, some rows and columns do not total 100%

Comparative Results by Academic Group and Achievement Level

Underachievement

A regression analysis was used to identify underachieving students. Students w GPA was one or more standard deviations below the level predicted by their comp ITBS (grade 4) score were defined as underachievers (n=62, 42%); those whose GP the level predicted or higher than the level predicted were defined as achievers (n 58%). Thus, two in five students sampled were underachieving based on regres analysis.

In terms of academic program, 14 gifted students (33%), 30 potentially gi students (49%), and 19 average students (39%) were underachieving. Half of the m in the sample (n=27) and 37% of females (n=35) were underachieving. Relative to g level, there was one 6th grader (13%), 24 7th graders (45%), 18 8th graders (38%), 19 9th graders (48%) who were underachieving.

Grade Point Average

The mean GPA for the sample was 3.1, which ranged from a low of 2.1 to a h of 3.6. ANOVA results indicated that GPAs were significantly different for the six gr of achievers and underachievers ($p < .001$, $F(5,143)=57.9$). Specifically, gi underachievers had a mean GPA of 2.8 compared to 3.6 for gifted achievers, 2.6 potentially gifted underachievers, 3.5 for potentially gifted underachievers, 2.1 for aver underachievers, and 3.3 for average achievers. In all cases, underachievers, regardles academic group, has lower GPAs than achieving counterparts. Further, the GPAs achievers were all very similar (e.g., 3.6, 3.5, and 3.3), while those for underachie varied (e.g., 2.8, 2.6, 2.1).

Achievement Test Scores

ITBS subscale scores for the sample were as follows: Science (67th percent Reading comprehension (66th percentile); Language total (69th percentile); Mathema (68th percentile); Vocabulary (62nd percentile); Social Studies (66th percentile); Science (73rd percentile).

The mean responses on the composite ITBS were also significantly different for six groups ($p < .001$, $F(5, 143)=38.8$). ANOVA results indicate that the following m percentile scores: gifted underachievers ($\bar{X}$ =83), gifted achievers ($\bar{X}$ =82), potenti gifted underachievers and achievers ($\bar{X}$ =72 for both groups), average underachiever =44), and average achievers ($\bar{X}$ =50).

Test Anxiety

Students' mean test anxiety score was 2.4 on a 4.0 scale, indicating a moderate level of test anxiety. ANOVA results reveal statistically significant differences in the overall test anxiety of the six groups ($p < .05$, $F(5, 143)=2.7$). Gifted underachievers and average achievers had the highest test anxiety ($\bar{X} =2.6$) while gifted achievers had the lowest ($\bar{X} =2.2$). The mean test anxiety score for the other students ranged from 2.4 (potentially gifted achievers) to 2.5 (potentially gifted underachievers, average underachievers).

MANOVA was used with the four test anxiety subscales as dependent variables and achievement groups as the independent variable. Specifically, univariate analyses indicate significant differences for the self-evaluation subscale ($F(5, 143)=3.3$, $p < .01$). Tukey analysis indicated that gifted achievers have the lowest mean of 2.1 on the self-evaluation subscale, compared to gifted underachievers ($\bar{X} =2.6$) and potentially gifted underachievers ($\bar{X} =2.4$). Significant differences were also found on the physiological subscale ($F(5, 143)=2.6$, $p < .05$), with gifted achievers reporting the lowest mean of 2.0 compared to average achievers ($\bar{X} =2.5$).

Indices of Achievement Attitudes and Behaviors

The following sections present students' responses to items that assessed their achievement attitudes and behaviors. Both descriptive and comparative results are presented.

The majority of students ($n=95$, 63%) report that they are told by teachers that they are "doing their best" in school. A little more than one third ($n=53$, 35%) are told that they need to "work harder in school."

When asked, "Could you do better in school if you tried?" 149 students responded "yes." Further, all 152 students responded that they wanted to "do better in school." Thus, while only 35% of students are told that their effort is low, almost all students do not feel that they are exerting high levels of effort. Other indices of low effort are described in the following sections.

Students were asked "Do you spend a lot of time doing homework?" Thirty-eight percent of the students ($n=58$) responded "no". The remaining students responded "yes".

Students report spending an average of two hours per day on homework; responses ranged from zero to five hours, with a modal response of one hour. The time spent doing homework was significantly different for the six groups ($p < .05$, $F(5, 143)=2.4$), with underachievers spending much less time on homework than achievers, regardless of academic group: gifted underachievers ($\bar{X} =1.7$), gifted achievers ($\bar{X} =2.3$), potentially gifted underachievers ($\bar{X} =1.8$), potentially gifted achievers ($\bar{X} =2.2$), average underachievers ($\bar{X} =1.5$), and average achievers ($\bar{X} =2.2$).

Two thirds of the students ($n=102$, 68%) report spending more time watching TV than studying. Chi-square results were not significantly different across the six groups.

Half of the students ($n=78$, 51%) report spending more time with friends rather than on homework. Chi-square results were not significantly different across the six groups.

Perceptions of Gifted Students and Education

Five items addressed students' perceptions about gifted education and gifted students. Students' mean response was 2.8, indicating somewhat positive perceptions. ANOVA results were statistically significant relative to the perceptions of the achievers and underachievers in the three academic groups ($p < .05$, $F(5, 143)=2.8$). Tukey analysis indicates that gifted underachievers ($\bar{X} =2.6$) were significantly less positive about these items than were gifted achievers ($\bar{X} =3.0$). In fact, gifted underachievers had the least positive attitudes about gifted students and gifted education.

Achievement Ideology

The African-American students hold strong, positive regard for tenets of the achievement ideology, as indicated by their mean response of 3.4. A statistically significant difference was found for the six groups, with underachievers in all academic groups expressing less support for tenets of the achievement ideology than achievers in all academic groups ($p < .05$, $F(,5, 143)=2.2$).

Perceptions of the Learning Environment and Attitudes Toward School Subjects

Several items assessed students' perceptions about and attitudes toward several aspects of the learning environment. When asked, "How important is school to you?", three in four students ($n=110$) responded "very important"; 26% ($n=40$) responded "important". Almost all students ($n=143$, 94%) want to go to college. Thus, the majority of Black students, regardless of academic group, consider school to be important and they aspire to high education.

In general, the Black students report favorable attitudes about the learning environment, as reflected by an overall mean response of 2.9 on a 4.0 scale for the 36 items. In terms of student engagement, a mean of 2.9 was reported. Thus, the Black students sampled tend to find school interesting; they enjoy learning. They also believe that there is ample opportunity for them to understand what is being taught ($\bar{X}$ =3.0) as measured by their responses to items on this subscale. Further, students report that teachers appear to enjoy teaching ($\bar{X}$ =2.9), that the socio-emotional climate is positive ($\bar{X}$ =2.9), and positive student-teacher relationship ($\bar{X}$ =3.1).

Attitudes Toward School Subjects

In general, the African-American students report positive attitudes about school subjects: math (3.1); science (3.1); reading (3.0); English (3.0); and social studies/history (3.0). MANOVA, univariate analysis, and Tukey analysis results with the five Estes subscales indicate the following: The responses of the six groups on the Estes math subscale were significantly different ($F(5, 143)=3.0$, $p < .05$), with gifted achievers have the highest mean response of 3.4 compared to average students who were achieving or underachieving ($\bar{X}$ =3.0 for both groups).

Significant differences were also found regarding attitudes toward reading ($F(5, 143)=3.9$, $p < .01$). Tukey analysis indicates that average underachievers had the lowest mean response of 2.6, which was significantly different from the responses of gifted achievers ($\bar{X}$ =3.3) and potentially gifted achievers ($\bar{X}$ =3.1).

The six groups held significantly different attitudes toward science ($F(5, 143)=3.9$, $p < .01$), with Tukey analysis indicating that gifted achievers reported much more positive attitudes ($\bar{X}$ =3.4) than gifted underachievers, average achievers, and average underachievers, all of whom had a mean of 3.0.

Finally, significant differences were found for attitudes toward English ($F(5, 143)=2.5$, $p < .05$). According to post hoc analysis (Tukey), the responses of potentially gifted achievers ($\bar{X}$ =3.2) and average underachievers ($\bar{X}$ =2.6) were significantly different. Thus, in four of the five Estes subscales, significant differences were found.

In addition to the Estes subscales, students were asked to express their opinions about certain aspects of the curriculum. For example, students responded to such statements as: "I get tired of learning about White people in class;" "I get more interested in school when we learn about Black people;" and "I want to learn more about Black people in school." In general, the statements indicate that while Black students seem content or even satisfied initially with the curriculum, open-ended responses reveal major concerns, particularly relative to the lack of multicultural focus.

Perceptions of Psychological, Social, and Cultural Variables

Perceptions of Psychological Variables

A mean response of 2.5 was generated for the psychological variables, indicating that students have numerous worries, anxieties, stressors, and concerns that may negatively influence their achievement. No differences were found across the six groups.

Racial Identity

A mean of 3.1 was generated for the racial identity scale, which indicates a positive regard for their racial status. No significant differences were found among the six groups whose mean scores ranged from 3.0 (average underachievers) to 3.2 (gifted underachievers, and potentially gifted underachievers).

Perceptions of Social Variables--Injustices

A mean of 2.5 was generated for items pertaining to students' perceptions of social injustices. ANOVA results were not significantly different for the six groups.

Perceptions of Social Variables--Peer Relations and Pressures

A mean of 2.1 was generated regarding Black students' perceptions about peer relationships and pressures. No significant differences were found in the mean responses of the six groups. Thus, students, regardless of academic group and achievement status, expressed few concerns regarding peer pressures and relationships.

Cultural Variables--Perceptions of Family Achievement Orientation

Students report strong, positive family achievement orientations, as indicated by the mean response of 3.5. No significant differences were found among the six groups, whose mean responses ranged from 3.4 (average underachievers) to 3.6 (gifted achievers, potentially gifted achievers).

Profiles of Achievement and Underachievement

A discriminant analysis was generated to examine those variables that best describe the attitudes and perceptions of gifted, potentially gifted, and average achievers and underachievers. The results are based on the responses of 148 students; one student was

excluded from the analysis due to at least one missing discriminating variable; and three were excluded due to missing data.

Five functions were generated, with function 1 explaining 54% of the total variance ($X^2 = 106.3$, $p < .01$). The remaining functions were not statistically significant. Function 1 contained the following six variables: Estes English, reading, math, and science, family achievement orientation, and students' perceptions of opportunities to understand the curriculum.

Summary of Results

1 In every school district, Black students were severely under-represented and under-identified as gifted.

2 42% of the Black students sampled were underachieving.

3 The mean GPA for the sample is relatively high (3.1). GPAs ranged from a low of 2.1 to a high of 3.6.

4 ITBS subscale scores ranged from a low of 62nd percentile for vocabulary to a high of 73rd for science.

5 Test anxiety, while relatively low for the sample is general, is problematic when one examines the self-evaluation and physiological subscales.

6 The Black students sampled, regardless of achievement level and academic group, held strong, positive racial identities.

7 In general, the Black students hold optimistic attitudes and perceptions, particularly their attitudes toward school (in general) and their perceptions of the learning environment.

8 In general, the Black students are positive about school subjects.

9 The Black students tend to have positive perceptions of gifted students and gifted education.

10 The Black students hold strong, positive support for tenets of the achievement ideology.

11 Despite the strong belief in principles of the achievement ideology, there was a discrepancy between achievement attitudes and achievement behaviors. Specifically, achievement behaviors do not match achievement attitudes.

12 Students expressed few psychological concerns. They express few worries, anxieties, stressors, and concerns that can negatively influence their achievement.

13 The Black students tend not to express many concerns about social injustices.

14 Students, regardless of academic group and achievement status, expressed few concerns regarding peer pressures and relationships.

15 Students report strong, positive family achievement orientations, regardless of achievement level and academic group.

Summary of Recommendations

(1) The school districts must focus on both talent development and the nurturance of abilities. Giftedness is less likely to be recognized among underachievers, culturally diverse, and low socio-economic status students. School personnel must be trained to recognize potential among students traditionally under-represented in gifted education programs. Talent that is neither recognized nor nurtured will atrophy.

(2) School personnel must recognize the heterogeneous, multifaceted nature of giftedness. Neither test scores nor teachers are able to capture the strengths of minority students without using multiple instruments and procedures. Quantitative and qualitative measures are needed; information is required from teachers, the student, and parents or family members. Instruments (tests, checklists, nomination forms, etc.) must be valid and reliability, as well as culturally sensitive. Further, the use of single cutoff scores, the use of composite test scores, and/or the exclusive or over-reliance on standardized tests is not considered best practice in gifted education.

(3) Test scores and teachers should not be gatekeepers that block the entrance of Black students into gifted programs and services. The use of tests in this manner is unethical and discriminatory.

(4) Socio-emotional or affective variables must be considered during the identification process, including the impact of self-concept, racial identity, and test anxiety on students' performance, achievement, and motivation.

(5) Curricular modifications are needed to increase the motivation and engagement of Black students. These changes must be multicultural in nature and integrated throughout the curriculum. All students benefit from education that is pluralistic and multicultural. The majority of students in the study are adamant that they desire curriculum that is multicultural because it increases self-understanding and self-appreciation, as well as racial pride. Relatedly, minority teachers are under-represented in education nationally and locally; all school districts are encouraged to increase their efforts to recruit and retain minority teachers who can serve as mentors, role models, and advocates for minority students.

(6) The Black students may require counseling to close the gap between their beliefs and behaviors. Approximately 2 in 5 students are underachieving, including 33% of gifted students, 50% of potentially gifted students, and 40% of average students. Yet, the students, notwithstanding academic group, hold strong and positive beliefs regarding the importance of school and the work ethic.

Counseling should focus on academic needs and issues relative to underachievement, as well as psychological and socio-emotional needs. For example, many students expressed concerns about peer pressures and relationships.

(7) Family involvement is a critical factor in students' success. Home-student-school partnerships are essential for promoting academic resilience among Black students.